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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the meetings of the United Nations Environment Programme Governing Council and the World Assembly of Non-Governmental Organizations Concerned with the Global Environment in Geneva, June 5-26, 1973. The need for environmental information was constantly stressed and ways of exchanging information discussed. A demonstration of a pilot project of the International Referral Service is described and the next steps in its development are indicated. The concluding remarks are concerned with the role of environmental information and education in the United Nations Environment Programme. (Author/JAB)

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A VIEW OF THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION PROBLEM

Report on the United Nations Environment Programme Governing Council and on the World Assembly of Non-Governmental Organizations Concerned with the Global Environment, June 5-26, 1973.

by

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"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Abstract

As at Stockholm, the need for environmental information was constantly stressed and ways of exchanging information discussed. A demonstration of a pilot project of the International Referral Service conducted for delegates is described and next steps in its development indicated. The paper concluded with a discussion of the role of environmental information and education in the United Nations Environment Programme.

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Hearing the word "Geneva", no feelings of a mystic "Only-One-Earth" unity will haunt the memory of environmentalists, as by the magic of "Stockholm". The first meeting of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Geneva was unavoidably dominated by assessment of hard realities and organizational adjustments in the interpretation of the global dream first brought nearer to our grasp a year ago.

The concurrent World Assembly of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) Concerned with the Global Environment was almost suffocated by procedural groping, but at the end produced an on-going liaison committee and a coherent declaration adopted by consensus. The NGO Assembly was convened "to achieve a focus of co-operation among NGOs and with UNEP on action programmes, education and information concerning the global environment".[1] Strangely enough, The Special Libraries Association was the only directly information-oriented organization in attendance. The Assembly met during the week-end suspension of plenary meetings in the middle of the two-week session of the Governing Council. This arrangement was determined in part with the idea of avoiding conflict with needs of the Council or National Delegations for the use of space, translation and microphone services, and so as to leave NGOs free for their role as observers of the plenary sessions. It unfortunately also had the effect of severely curtailing the time and opportunity of NGO representatives for discussion of substantive matters in their own Assembly and for group meetings much desired for exchange of ideas, impressions and case experiences. This was a deprivation and disappointment keenly felt by some participants who had made especially long journeys from distant countries in order

to attend.

All meetings, both of the Council and the NGO Assembly, were held in the new section of the Palais des Nations, using halls and office space rushed to completion for the occasion and linked with each other, the cafeteria the main entrance and general offices of the UN by still unfinished corridors and passageways where delegates and observers mingled with working electricians, wall and floor finishers, and their equipment. In a dimly lighted, rather formless open lobby area between two sets of stairs and escalators, a collection of chairs and small tables provided a lounge of sorts where people could meet and exchange opinions or information. One gained the impression that the architects and designers of the new section of the Palais des Nations had either not consulted or had ignored the advice of environmental specialists in creating this costly addition of windowless halls, lounge and circulation areas to the noble spaciousness and old-fashioned comforts of the original building. By oversight or mischance, the air conditioning service did not function during the two days of sessions of the NGO Assembly, to the servere discomfort of the translators in their glass-walled cubbyholes and the considerable irritation of the NGO representatives, and probably contributed to deficiences in their exchanges and final decisions. In spite of their dismay and personal environmental discomfort, the NGOs addressed themselves conscientiously to the questions of further development and coordination of their role in improving the state of the world environment as collaborators, friends and critics of the UNEP. Many representatives were present for the full two weeks of the Governing Council session. Briefings for NGOs by the UNEP Secretariat at 9:30 each morning were

well attended. The NGO representatives were anxious to get down to work at the NGO Assembly sessions, and made the most of the few chances they had or could devise to get into substantive discussions according to their special objectives and expertise. The three most extensive sessions of this kind were spontaneously organized to consider the subjects of economic and social aspects of development and environment, of human settlements (especially in relation to the proposed UN exposition and conference to be held in Vancouver in 1976), and the proposed International Referral Service of the UNEP.

THE BACKGROUND

The range of NGO involvement originated in the 109 points of the "Recommendations for Action" of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. In their report, SLA delegates Mary Anglemyer and Signe R. Ottersen (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars) focused on the international role of information in environmental problem-solving.[2] In a state-of-the-art paper and recent report to SLA, Mary Anglemyer dealt with further implications of the Stockholm conference, and urged the library profession to take the leadership in recognizing and improving the environmental information process.[3] In the year that passed between Stockholm and Geneva a series of developments in international organization emphasized the relevance of these comments.

During this time there was hardly any national or international body - especially in the industrialized countries - that had not put the environment on its agenda. New, resource-oriented information

management networks emerged into varying stages of proposal, drafting and development.[4] In addition to information pertaining to environmental protection, management and planning, messages about the environmental information process itself grew spectacularly in density. Each of the disciplines and professions began taking a long, hard look at the process, and discovered that environmental information not only represents economic and political currency, but it also reflects the relative place of that particular profession or discipline in a problem-focused community or society. In a succession of conferences, workshops and symposia the awareness of the new problem surfaced: A solution had to be sought for eventually interlinking all these phenomena, from the "invisible colleges" of dedicated individuals to the massive networks and subsystems of earth resources information.

In the United States, the National Environmental Information Symposium, sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and held in Cincinnati, Ohio, September 24-27, 1972, took a considerable step in this direction. More than 1700 participants from the United States and about 50 international observers attended this "first general convocation of the environmental information community."[5] With its pattern of user group panels responding to speakers' sessions, the Symposium attempted and was successful in a new approach.

Throughout the year there was growing awareness of the emerging new discipline, called "environmental science". But, parenthetically, does this do justice to the philosophical/religious/artistic/literary aspects of the ecological movement? Does it leave room for the humanistic contributions of city planners Doxiades and Ponte, industrial designer Papanek, landscape architect McHarg, for poems like Kunitz,

"War Against the Trees," songs like Joni Mitchell's "Parking Lot," or graffiti as an art form? Where will innovative teaching, for instance the Seminar on Environmental Reporting at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications, be recorded and integrated with all the rest? How could this seminar identify similar efforts in other countries, and join forces with them? According to the recent words of Maurice F. Strong, Executive Director of the UNEP: "The varying needs of the national information media should be met through the supply of adequate basic information for their work."[6]

In an effort to find solutions to the growing problems of international integration of information sources, several world-wide studies have been conducted. Two examples are UNISIST and UNEP's International Referral Service (IRS). The scope of this report does not permit a discussion of UNISIST, the world-wide scientific information system jointly planned by ICSU and UNESCO, and readers are referred to the proposed system's newsletter.[7] The second example, UNEP and its proposed service will be discussed in some detail.

INTERNATIONAL GOVERNMENT AND THE ROLE OF NGOs

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was established by the General Assembly on December 15, 1972. Resolution 2997 (XXVII) provided for a policy-making Governing Council of 58 member states (16 seats for Africa, 3 for Asia; 6 for Eastern Europe; 10 for Latin America, and 13 for Western Europe and other states).[8] The Governing Council is responsible for the coordination of the manifold, on-going environmental programs in the U.N. system. (e.g. FAO's Soil Data Processing System, UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere, WHO's International

Reference Centre for Waste Disposal, etc.) Coordination of these programs with emerging ones is made difficult by their disparate characteristics, levels and forms of operation. Some are monitoring systems, others registers of research, and still others full-scale data banks.

The Environment Secretariat, headed by Maurice F. Strong of Canada will be the first global United Nations organization with headquarters outside of Europe and North America, when it moves to its permanent location in Nairobi, Kenya, on October 1, 1973. The Environment Fund being raised by voluntary contributions from national governments, in distinction from the UN ordinary budget, has a target of $100 million for the period of 1973-1977. Pledges as of June 26, 1973 were in the neighborhood of $55 million, contributed by thirty countries.[9] The U.S. contribution of $40 million is before the Congress for appropriation. In broad terms, the purpose of the fund is to meet special costs for environmental action approved by the Ccuncil beyond or outside of services which are or can be provided by other agencies in the UN system. Under this heading, a pilot project for the IRS was approved at the Geneva meeting.

What is the role of NGOs in this network? What links are developing between this private sector and the governmental process? NGOs are considered valuable on the international scene, because (a) they can serve as objective "observers" and critics of governmental environmental disputes, (b) they are likely to have professional and disciplinary bonds with their counterparts in countries with different ideologies, while governments are more rigidly divided by political philosophy, (c) each NGO addresses itself to a problem or group of problems which reach

deeply into the life of local communities. "They ... reserve their rights as citizen bodies to offer constructive criticism of official programs and to remain alert to new needs and possibilities," as stated in the NGO draft document in Geneva.[10]

In both Stockholm and Geneva, as well as at two interim NGO meetings, the organizations expressed their support for UNEP. But this support is not unquestioning, and certainly not uncritical. In its own terrain of expertise, a specialized professional or scientific organization represents the collective problem-solving and creative power of its members. On the other hand, an organization's relationship to a government agency will greatly depend on the particular value the organization or institution represents for the success and future of the agency's program. As a former Staff Political Scientist of the National Water Commission said:

> Information is a political tracer element that delineates the channels of communication within a decision-making process. Up to this decade, the channel from environmental interest to decision makers was negligible.[11]

In UNEP's relationship with the environmental private sector there is actually more unity of purpose and cohesiveness than in many other problem-focused fields. All the basic documents relating to the program express the need for scientific, technical, legal and other expert knowledge. "Organizations outside the United Nations System, particularly those in the countries and regions concerned, should be utilized in support of programmes financed by the Environment Fund."[12] It is interesting to note how UNEP approaches the conglomerate of institutional expertise:

> In government, the tasks are divided by sector such as agriculture, health, education, transport, industry and natural resources. Development projects are often evaluated in terms of the costs and benefits within the sector... And in schools and universities the subject matter is divided into fields or disciplines such as physics, mathematics, chemistry, engineering, economics, political science and history.[13]

This juxtaposition of problem areas ("sectors") and various approaches to analysis and solution ("disciplines") has significant implications for the organization of environmental data and information.

Assuming that the library and information sciences have their legitimate place in the line of disciplines and in the configuration of institutional relationships, the question is: What is the relative value of the "product" (or "contribution") the library and information professions offer to the international environmental program? This product is twofold, (a) it is environmental information, and (b) it is professional knowledge and skill necessary for the improvement of environmental information.

An analysis of UNEP documents, particularly the "Action Plan for the Human Environment," (UNEP/GC/5) which was discussed by the Governing Council in Geneva in factual and budget-minded terms, finds that information is seen by all elements in the UNEP - NGO cooperative efforts as a forceful and potent factor in environmental improvement. In fact, the value of "information" to the program is implied even if the word itself is not used. Because of the diffuse and unstandardized usage of terminology in this field, throughout the document, UNEP/GC/5, terms like "the collection of research data," "the exchange," "transfer

of information," "documentation" and many others imply various aspects of the same professional activity.

Following from the line of thought that the role of a professional organization or institution will be largely determined by the "contribution" it can make to the pool of expertise, and that "information" and the various professional activities relating to it represent a widely needed and frequently stressed "contribution", one may conclude that information-related institutions (including libraries) would play a key role in UNEP's program. In this case a unified, systematic approach to the planning of various information roles would be used in the interest of the whole range of UNEP program needs. Such unified approach would embrace the role of information and the information professions not only (a) in environmental problem-solving and technical fields (e.g. pollutants, atmosphere, oceans, energy, etc.) but also in (b) broad "environmental education" of the public and (c) in the education and training of environmental information specialists.

This is a far more complex and far-reaching interpretation of what "information" means for the UNEP program than has been brought out so far. It should not be assumed that the International Referral Service alone can meet this need. As of the recent conference in Geneva, however, there is no indication that this unified view of the information functions as it relates to UNEP has been discovered by either UNEP or, with some exceptions, by the institutions of the library profession.

THE INTERNATIONAL REFERRAL SERVICE

As part of "Earthwatch," the global monitoring and environment evaluation program of UNEP, the International Referral Service for environmental information sources was approved by recommendation 101 of the Stockholm conference. The recommendation emphasized the need for the "advise of a group of experts." The service was originally envisioned as a computer-based switchboard mechanism. An information user will receive a list of names, addresses, and descriptions of potential information sources, rather than an answer to his question. "Sources of information" have been identified by the IRS as "formal information services, information analysis centers, data files and small groups of individuals with particular expert knowledge."[14] Other systems providing similar service will be able to "plug-in." The innovative factor is, of course, the inclusion in the network of individual expertise, a trend which is gaining attention in the profession and in library school curricula. The enormous heterogeneity of the world-wide user group will put unusual responsibilities on those who are planning the system.

> Technical assistance and training should be extended to facilitate the use of the service by developing countries. There will also be a need for a general training of both users and those responsible for gathering the data, to ensure that information sources are correctly catalogued and users are able to formulate their questions in such a way as to make the most efficient use of the service.[15]

Unfortunately the demonstration before the Governing Council took place at the end of a long day when the delegates' minds were somewhat jaded

and not receptive to new, sophisticated projects; the documentation was incomplete, and the examples rather demonstrative of a partial end project than of the switchboard process. One of the best papers was a contribution by Horst Rittel entitled "UMPLIS, The Environment Planning Information System of the Federal Republic of Germany"[16]. The chief criticism of the IRS plan is that it is intended for industrialized countries and that the underdeveloped countries cannot benefit by this service. As a consequence of this fear, the final Action Plan, while permitting the further development of plans for the IRS, refused immediate approval and put quite a different emphasis on the whole information process:

> to continue further development of the scope, structure and capacity of the International Referral System with Special consideration for timely and appropriate access by the developing countries, free of charge, to this facility.17

In addition, the Secretatiat was instructed to pursue other endeavors in the information field always with special emphasis on the needs of the developing countries.

NGOs at the conference insisted that interaction between the IRS and the non-governmental sector must be truly two-way. It would be inconceivable that the IRS could depend on the information resources and services of organizations which, at the same time, would not be eligible to use the IRS themselves.[18] This and some other questions remained unanswered. The "Draft Statement of the NGO's Assembly to the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme" made the following unanimous recommendation:

> NGOs are fully prepared to supply constant information to the system. They also urge that the UNEP recognize the critical importance of NGOs, both as sources of information and as organizations in greatest need of that information.[19]

IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

The IRS is only a first step. Viewed in its totality and carefully interpreted, UNEP's action plan will require from our profession the re-thinking of some concepts and the development of new approaches to information handling. Even while we are debating the merits and drawbacks of some new trends, the international scientific and professional community, mobilized for coordinated environment planning and management, has already set a whole mechanism of information activities into motion.

The UNEP'"Action Plan" (UNEP/GC/5) classifies these activities into three broad categories[20]:

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT	ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT
Evaluation and review (Identification of what knowledge is needed) Research (To create new knowledge) Monitoring to gather data and to evaluate data Information exchange (To disseminate knowledge)	Planning Conservation Development

SUPPORTING MEASURES

"Education at all stages and training of specialists, multi-disciplinary professionals and technical personnel,"

"Public information to facilitate the utilization of knowledge in decision-making at every level,"

Organizational activities

Financing

Technical cooperation

What is peculiar about this scheme is that "information exchange" is classed under assessment, but "public information to facilitate the utilization of knowledge" is seen as a supporting measure. However, in the information transfer process, (a) the gathering and the evaluation of data, (b) the dissemination of specialized knowledge derived from data, and (c) information services to the public are three phases in the same chain of functions. The crucial point is that the same data and knowledge may be interpreted, packaged and presented differently by different information services, depending on the information context (institutional, industrial, governmental, academic, public etc.)

Information professionals are needed who understand the social implications of the information flow, and who can draw on and interact with information sources in other information environments.

One of the particular objectives of UNEP is "to help governments increase public awareness through better education and knowledge of environmental concerns and facilitate wide participation in and support for environmental action."[21]

This takes us directly into the critical area of mass information, variously translated as "enlightenment" and "propaganda." The interpretation of "educating the public", indeed may vary from country to country, from cultural area to cultural area, depending on the ideologic emphasis or stigma attached to the concept of "influencing the public mind," that is, changing people's thinking, attitudes, value systems and life styles. Maurice F. Strong alluded to this conflict in his dinner speech on the first day of the NGO conference, when he said that large segments of the UN constituency object to the idea of "influencing the public". The UNEP document's carefully chosen expression, "public awareness" (rather than "Love of mankind" or "Love of nature" or any other expression with ethical connotation) was meant to avoid just this controversial point.

In the United States, an official source states:

> Through environmental education, we can learn how to explore the implications of our activities and the choices we have, and can establish a pattern of feedback to help us constantly reassess our activities. This would be the process of 'continuous social diagnosis' that was emphasized ... in Stockholm ... [22].

On the other side of this dichotomy of approach stands the "Declaration of the Non-Governmental Organizations" at Stockholm (signed by NGO observers in their "individual capacities"), which pronounced unhesitatingly that:

> The essentially interdisciplinary, humanistic and ethical aspects of environmental education - the science of ecology, planetary loyality, respect for life, care for others and a lack of all rapacity - should be stressed at every level of education and mass communication so that all people develop a primary love for their fellow human beings and for their native planet.[23]

To find a compromise in this philosophical-political divergence of opinions, the UNEP action plan insists that "By reason of cultural and political differences, the processes of information and education should be mainly the responsibility of national bodies."[24] In this context, "information" may be interpreted as public enlightenment rather than the provision of research data.

It seems to me that the long tradition of ideological soul-searching of the public library, in the United States and many other parts of the world, has significant implications for the issue of public environmental education. A truly dynamic and relevant public library is sensitive to the changes in community and individual attitudes; it also has the capability to "educate for awareness of alternatives" rather than to prescribe ideological and ethical values. Thus the public library could become a focal point in environmental education, but not without fully understanding the social implications of the total environmental information flow. On the other hand, information specialists in all other fields need a basic

understanding of the public aspects of environmental education. In all problem-focused professions and disciplines the most dramatic integration of environmental information resources - human and institutional - will probably take place at the community level, with the inclusion of an increasingly participating public.

WHAT LIES AHEAD IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION?

From the vantage point of information services, at least four broad organizational avenues are developing, along which professional associations and other NGOs may interact with each other and UNEP.

(1) Direct interaction with UNEP, and its various components. The acquisition and careful study of documents relating to UNEP and the IRS would enable an organization or institution to ascertain where and in what way it could support the program professionally.[25]

(2) Cooperation within the new structure. At the Geneva conference an informal Liaison Committee was created, to keep communications between UNEP and the NGOs open. It includes thirteen organizational members. Each of these organizations will delegate a representative to serve on the Liaison Committee. In addition, the conference created working groups in such fields as:

Natural Resources and Eco-systems

Population, Health and Biology

The Economic and Social Aspects of Development and Environment

Information and Education

Human Settlements

Institutional Problems of NGOs of less developed countries

Energy, Economy and Commerce

Inter-Disciplinary aspects of Environmental problems

Law of the Sea Conference

These groups will have the task to (1) mobilize the expertise available in the NGO community and assist in the formulation of policy and the identification of issues, (2) to take part in a world movement of information and education.[26]

(3) Action through existing professional groups. A series of international conferences in key problem areas will mobilize the best professional resources of countries: The Conference on the Law of the Sea, 1973, the Population Conference and the Conference on Environmental Medicine and Biology, both in 1974, the Conference on Human Settlements, 1976, and the next meeting of the UNEP Governing Council with the presence of NGO observers, in March 1974, in Nairobi.

(4) Interaction through existing international information groups, for instance the advisory committee for UNISIST, IFLA, FID, ISO, the International Centre of the International Serials Data System, the Abstracting Board of the International Council of Scientific Unions, etc.

THE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION

SLA has the potential to become a leader in environmental information activities. It bears repeating, it was the only information

science organization represented at Geneva. It was heartening to learn, on my return from that conference, that the Board of Directors has approved the establishment of a Special Environmental Information Committee. It can play an important role in developing the total environmental activities of the library and information science profession, in experimentation and research into innovative ways of information handling, and in advising delegates of member countries of the United Nations in line with the recommendations of the Stockholm and Geneva Conferences.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO UNEP AND THE NGO COMMUNITY

A) The International Referral Service (IRS) should be considered only as one of the approaches to environmental information. In order to maintain a unifying perspective, the whole range of informational and educational support to environmental activities should be developed.

The following presents an overview of the role of the information and library professions:

(a) Environmental education

Formal (academic, special, institute and association libraries and school media centers)

Informal (public libraries, civic centers, citizens' referral centers, inner-city centers, information officers of community agencies, museums, cultural organizations, etc.)

(b) Environmental research, planning and management

In cooperation with the IRS and otherwise:
All types of information centers and libraries, supporting users in any of the following categories:

Users of specialized, research, and scientific and technical data (academic, governmental, industrial, legal, medical libraries, etc.)

Users of management information

Legislators, regulatory agencies, etc.

(c) Education and training of environmental information specialists

Formal (Graduate schools of library and information sciences)

Informal (Regional meetings, workshops, seminars, sponsored by the professional organizations of the information field)

B) More emphasis is needed on the cooperation of information specialists, at the community level, not only through libraries, but through every institution or agency. Many of the environmental issues will be decided in local communities, with strong citizen participation. National and international information networks will have to depend on community input for comprehensiveness. It is essential that public librarians and other information

professionals find new ways of interaction (e.g. "human networks," total community information utilities, referral services, etc.).

C) The multi-disciplinary, multi-jurisdictional and multi-institutional nature of environmental information calls for a strong and intensive educational and training program for information specialists around the world. Local social and economic conditions must be carefully considered. Innovative ways of information handling (e.g. information counseling, filtering, repackaging, etc.) should be developed not only on the basis of new technologies, but on the basis of societal and individual attitudes in information seeking.

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NGOs wishing to be in touch with these groups are asked to contact Mr. Cyril Ritchie, Secretary of the Environment Liaison Board, c/o International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 7 Ave. de la Paix, Geneva, Switzerland.